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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historian's method of handling evidence and explores some approaches to the improvement of college students' reasoning skills through the analysis of historical documents. The starting point in the development of the reasoning skills should be an exploration of the historian's task and the nature of the evidence, preferably in a small group discussion format. The student must be made to understand that an effective assessment of a piece of evidence can only be made against an informed background. Recognizing that a historical document does not exist in a vacuum, the student must inquire into the events surrounding the piece of evidence under consideration and place it in its social, political, and economic context. A concern for context also necessitates an exploration of the background of the witness whose writings are under consideration in the classroom. The instructor should then raise the question of whether contemporary attitudes or the students' own values influence criticism and understanding of the source. The next step should be an intensified focus on the text itself. Careful attention should be devoted to the words, their meanings, and their implications. One good guideline for students is that they accept as historical fact only those particulars that may be confirmed by the testimony of two or more reliable sources. The instructor should then introduce the concept of reasoned interpretation as inherent in the historian's work. Suggestions for the use of historical documents in the classroom are made. (Author/RM)

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Title of Paper: "The Critical Analysis of Documentary Evidence: Basic Skills in the History Classroom"

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The Critical Analysis of Documentary Evidence: Basic Skills in the History Classroom

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Responding to a Congressional Committee's inquiry about his occupation, radical historian William A. Williams once asserted that his job was to "teach young people to think." While the goal is widely shared within the profession, teachers have too often avoided self-conscious efforts to define the process by which it is achieved in the classroom. This essay examines the historian's method of handling evidence and explores some approaches to the improvement of student reasoning skills through the analysis of historical documents. It also assumes that critical/analytical powers are skills as basic as those normally considered under that rubric.

The starting point in the development of the reasoning skills should be an exploration of the historian's task and the nature of evidence, preferably in a small group discussion format. A useful analogy in such a discussion is that of "historian as detective," whose responsibility it is to formulate probing questions, seek answers, and develop interpretive insight from the answers which emerge. His basic methodological problem becomes "how to interrogate witnesses, how to test evidence, how to assess the reliability and the relevance of the testimony." Similarly, the undergraduate approaches the evidence with a basic question in mind: How do we know that something is true? Classroom discussion of this problem leads inescapably to the conclusion that the student must study the written record of the past and judge the credibility of witnesses.[1]

The initial approach to the use of evidence favored by many college freshmen is to "let the records speak for themselves." Faced by such a proposal, the instructor might confront the class with T. E. Lawrence's oft-cited assertion that:

> The historian is retired into a shell to study the whole truth; which means that he learns to attach insensate importance to documents. The documents are liars.[2]

Extended discussion of the conclusions which may legitimately be drawn from the record produces an awareness of the extent to which the record either conceals or remains silent, and that a document must be given life through exposure to the student/historian's critical analysis. In short, stress upon having the facts do the speaking must be supplemented by care in finding out what the facts actually show.

Before attacking the documents, however, it is appropriate to discuss with the novice the limitations under which he/she works. Since the past must be understood through the medium of the sources, the truth is elusive at best. Only a portion of past events were observed and a portion of them remembered; still less was recorded and not all of the written record has survived to be used by the scholar. What the student works with may be distorted as well as incomplete, both factors which militate against the making of extravagant claims based upon any given piece of evidence. In the words of E. H. Carr, "no document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought--what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought."[3]

A document, then, is quite meaningless until the historian deciphers it through a thought process that screens for motivation, bias, intent, and context. The first insight gained by the student involves the realization that an effective assessment of a piece of evidence can only be made against an informed background. Recognizing that a historical document does not exist in a vacuum, therefore, he/she inquires into the events surrounding the piece of evidence under consideration. The ability to understand human behavior in its original setting by putting oneself "in the place of other individuals of other times and to interpret documents...with their eyes, standards, and sympathies" may be thought of as "historical-mindedness." Historical perspective is achieved when the "angle of view of participants is somehow brought into effective contrast with the quite different angle of view of today's observer."[4]

Historical-mindedness leads directly to an appreciation of the fact that context is crucial to accurate interpretation of the evidence. The meaning of a document cannot be divorced from "its own contemporary history." A critical element of historical thinking thus involves "the responsible use of evidence to fill out for the episode in question its place both in relevant developments down through time and in the context of its own time."[5] As he/she examines a primary source, the student is encouraged to ask: where does this document fit into the broader socio-economic-political-cultural environment of the era from which it is drawn?

A concern for context also necessitates an exploration of the background of the witness whose writings are under consideration in the classroom. The student must be cautioned against an uncritical assumption that first hand material is always more reliable: the notion that a primary source is by definition objective. Discussion should instead stress the reality that "primary sources, produced in the heat of the moment, are automatically biased" and are to be used with "discriminating judgment" in order that the analyst arrive at "a closer approximation of the truth." Indeed, critical examination of a document may aid the student in recognizing "the sources of bias in himself and his contemporaries no less than among the personages of history."[6]

Confronted by a document, then, the student approaches the evidence with a skeptical eye, raising such questions as:

1. Who was the witness?
2. To whom (or what audience) was the document addressed?
3. What were the circumstances at the time the document was generated?

4. What was the witnesses purpose?
5. Was the witness self-aware? Did he acknowledge his own assumptions?
6. What opportunity did he have to know what he said? What was the witnesses' position vis-a-vis the subject of his testimony?
7. How much time elapsed between the writing and the actual event?
8. What portion of the evidence is fact, as opposed to conjecture?
9. What probable interest was he defending, if any?
10. Has he acknowledged facts contradictory to his interest or bias?

The student's ability to deal with such questions is of course dependent upon his/her understanding of the witness' background and experience. An effective discussion approach to this problem is to ask the discussion group about the "cultural baggage" that the document's author brings to his task as recorder of events. Students readily grasp the fact that the witness quite probably had religious, political, class, and family ties that affected his capacity for telling the truth. In short, the source is a human document reflecting the world view of the person responsible for it.[7]

Once the student recognizes the influence of values and loyalties on historical witnesses, the instructor may raise the question of whether contemporary attitudes or the analyst's own values influence higher criticism and understanding of the source. Robert Daniels argues that history teaches one great qualification: "caution against overly simple commitment to values, past or present." To be objective, the student must face the facts whatever they may indicate. Exceptional analytical rigor is required when "facing facts about people or institutions that you have endorsed because they represented your values."[8]

After the novice has placed a particular document in its social, political, and economic context and scrutinized it for bias (simultaneously attempting to screen out personal values), the next step should be an intensified focus on the text itself. By this time we have presumably gained knowledge about the witness' background, bias, and authority to address the issues/events dealt with in the source. At this stage of analysis, the student-historian must again approach the document in question with skepticism, trusting only his/her own judgment. Once again, the "questioning activity" is the central critical exercise, as the discussion group asks "exactly what does this statement mean?" The instructor should direct attention to such subtle problems as tone, manner, and meaning, as well as reliability:

1. What did the words mean in their original context? How does the 1890's definition of "imperialism," for example, compare with that of the 1980's?
2. What did the witness mean in the original text? What light does this particular statement shed on the general subject it addresses? And what is the significance of the fact that this person made this statement?

3. Is it possible that the document has been tampered with? Could the statement be a forgery? Is there any evidence that the text has been altered or that deletions have occurred? What about censorship?
4. How does the document relate to other materials from the same era? Do other contemporary accounts differ? Is its argument contradicted by other, unmentioned facts?
5. Do obvious errors raise questions about the source's reliability? Does it contain references to events or ideas not prevalent when it was alleged to have appeared?[9]

In sum, careful attention should be devoted to the words, their meanings, and their implications. The student should be encouraged to appreciate the uniqueness of each witness and to strive for understanding of the observer's intent. The task before the careful critic is to comprehend "not only what a document's words may formally mean, but also what his witness <u>really intended to say</u>."[10] By attention to detail, familiarity with chronology, and common sense reasoning, he/she must try to arrive at a decision that is convincing.

However, under what circumstances is a witness' account to be adjudged acceptable? How do we arrive at something which may be treated as a historical fact? One guideline students can often understand and apply is the acceptance of only those particulars that may be confirmed by the testimony of two or more reliable sources. Occasionally, printed or manuscript sources are reinforced by alternative sources, such as archaeological or filmic evidence. Commenting on the employment of journalistic accounts, Robin Winks counsels students to assess the credibility of any newspaper before using it as a source. More specifically, he warns against treating any report as truth unless it has been "reported in roughly the same form by more than one wire service, in more than one newspaper, and in the latest edition of that newspaper."[11] Corroboration, in short, moves the analyst closer to an accurate reading of a past event.

One <u>caveat</u> to this procedure, however, is that freshman students commonly expect a document (or a secondary source) to reveal something which they may regard as "the truth." Reminded that history is not entirely a science and is often inexact at best, they persist in seeking a definitive conclusion on the reliability of the source before them. It is the discussion leader's task to help them see that an answer "may not be nearly as useful as a careful summary of those particular facts about the source that limit its trustworthiness--and that usually show it to be more valuable for some purposes as well as less valuable for others."[12] In short, the character and limitations of the source will condition the acceptability of the testimony it offers.

Once the student has become comfortable with the idea of uncertainty, the instructor should introduce the concept of reasoned interpretation as inherent in the historian's work. When analyzing a document, one must "milk" the source for all it will yield by reformulating questions and organizing the responses into a meaningful pattern. Critical analysis requires a sensitivity to the nuances in the source: the "ability to see in a document shades of meaning" and to "sense implications in the document wider than the statements in the document itself." The instructor should encourage the exercise of historical

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imagination and cultivate the tendency to think of evidence intuitively. As R. V. Collingwood has noted, "the historian's data consist of what he is able to perceive; and if he can perceive little, no one but himself is to blame."[13] Making what the student regards as a "leap of faith" is a difficult step for the undergraduate, yet not impossible if classroom discussion has stressed the tentative character of the historian's conclusions and the legitimacy of inference.

It is therefore useful to question students about the nature of historical evidence and the bases for historians' conclusions. Such initiatives normally lead to discussion of the variety of source materials available to the student of the past, including written sources, artifacts, film, and oral history accounts. Many approaches to the use of documents in the classroom are open to the instructor:

1. Student selection of documents (usually but not exclusively from a campus or local library). Students may be asked to conduct independent analyses of their chosen sources.
2. Instructor employment of visual documents (original film or video footage). The analysis of films as documentary evidence is an effective device for instruction in critical thinking. A good example would be the use of the fine motivation films from Frank Capra's Why We Fight series (1943-1945).
3. Integrated use of mixed media units. Student reading of written documents and classroom use of complementary filmic evidence often produce revealing discussions. For example, students may be assigned Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1905), in connection with a classroom screening of Cry of the Children (1912). The result is fruitful discussion of meanings to be drawn from alternative forms of documentary evidence.
4. Assignment of fragmentary documents. Either anthologies or selected handouts may be assigned. The advantage of this approach is that the scope of inquiry may be kept within limits.
5. Student conduct of interviews or exposure to commercially available oral histories. These accounts may become the subjects of intensive classroom analyses which focus on the problems and opportunities presented by oral history.
6. Assigned reading of extended documents, such as Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) or Upton Sinclair's, The Jungle (1905). Both have produced excellent discussion stressing the purposes for which certain documents are produced, the backgrounds of their respective authors, their credibility as historical accounts, and the place of caution as well as perceptiveness in interpreting documents.

In my own experience, the last approach has been a very rewarding use of documentary evidence. The assignment of a complete account enables the student to immerse himself/herself in the subject material. Moreover, the editorial introductions provided in the paperback editions are very helpful in placing the witnesses in their historical contexts, thus contributing to the student's analytical efforts.

But do the sources have a place in the introductory course? Though different instructors will select alternate documents, the analysis of primary sources in some form will continue to be one successful technique in the history classroom. Wise use, however, requires a stress on the meanings which may be derived from the documents rather than the intrinsic value of any given piece of evidence. As many experimental courses have demonstrated, there is substantial value in student appraisal of evidence. Such classroom experience "attunes students to the shortcomings of secondary sources and in general makes them very critical readers of historical works." It also sensitizes them to the "operations that historians can perform to 'make sense' out of data."[14]

The ultimate goal, then, is to teach history as process: as a means whereby students gain experience in critical and analytical thought. Here is one important point at which history intersects with other branches of liberal arts education, and it is here that history teachers can not only help communicate a "sense of history" to a generation in need of historical consciousness, but also contribute to the strengthening of the student's essential reasoning skills. Work with documents enhances both historical mindedness and analytical skills by teaching students to pose and answer historical questions.

Concerned as it must be with the development of intellectual rigor, historical analysis as a basic skill is closely linked with facility in written expression. Just as writing constitutes an "exercise in thinking--in organizing information, in relating details to generalizations, in combining ideas into a logical demonstration or interpretation," so history involves "careful organization and reflective interpretation." Historical writing entails systematic thought and the ordering of a "hierarchical relationship between generalizations and details."[15] For the undergraduate, this means learning to read a source critically and to develop from it logical conclusions. Indeed, as Historian David Keightly has recently argued, it may be that the major student writing problems are in fact "problems in thinking about history in general" or even "problems about thinking itself."[16]

Exposure to the elements of historical thinking, therefore, is essential to education in the humanities. Not only does it lead the novice towards an understanding of the discipline and the historian's craft, but it also equips the student with a critical survival skill for life in the world of ideas; for the power of analysis is central to any concept of truly liberal education.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robin W. Winks, ed. The Historian As Detective: Essays on Evidence (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. xviii-xv, 39; Robert V. Daniels, Studying History: How and Why? (Englewood: Prentice-Hall, 1966), pp. 77, 78.

[2]Quoted in Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, The Modern Researcher (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 50.

[3]Edward Hallett Carr, What Is History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 16; see also Paul L. Ward, Elements of Historical Thinking (Washington: American Historical Association, n.d.), pp. 7, 8; Walter T.K. Nugent, Creative History: An Introduction to Historical Study (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1967), p. 99; Louis Gottschalk, Understanding History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 45.

[4]Ward, p. 23; Gottschalk, p. 136.

[5]Ward, p. 12; Henry Steele Commager, The Study of History (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Books, 1966), p. 52; John B. Halstead, "Reading History-An Historical Classic as the Basis for the Introductory Course," Paper Presented at American Historical Association Conference on the Introductory Course, Annapolis, Md., Sept. 28-30, 1980, p. 13.

[6]Daniels, pp. 89, 90; see also Barzun and Graff, pp. 181-82

[7]Thomas Spencer Jerome, "The Case of the Eyewitnesses," in Winks, pp. 190-91; see also Daniels, p. 92; Barzun and Graff, pp. 181-82; Ward, p. 10; Gottschalk, p. 148.

[8]Daniels, pp. 88, 98.

[9]Carl G. Gustavson, A Preface to History (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1955), p. 171; Nugent, pp. 79-80; Daniels, p. 93; Robin G. Collingwood, "Who Killed John Doe? The Problem of Testimony," in Winks, pp. 51, 52, 53; Allen Nevins, "The Case of the Cheating Documents," in Winks, pp. 206, 209; Ward, p. 23.

[10]Gottschalk, pp. 193-94; Ward, p. 11

[11]Winks, p. 193; Gottschalk, p. 166; R. G. Collingwood, Essays in the Philosophy of History, ed. William Debbins, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), pp. xiv.

[12]Ward, pp. 9-10.

[13]Collingwood, "The Nature and Aims of A Philosophy of History," In Debbins, Essays, p. 53; Winks, pp. xv; Nugent, pp. 84-5, 91.

[14]William R. Taylor, "The Wisconsin Laboratory Course in American History," AHA Newsletter, Vol. VI, No. 3 (February, 1968), pp. 11, 14. The Wisconsin experimental course asked students "to examine precisely how they formulated the judgments and concepts which they brought to the materials," which appeared to make them "more sensitive to the uses and the abuses of sources by historians who wrote from the same materials." Taylor and his colleagues wisely worked in small discussion groups "as a means of acquainting students with the problems of interpreting the different kinds of material available to them." The most successful procedure was to have students "read and write in class about a source they had not seen before." Instructors went through the same exercise in analysis, a procedure which provided "a certain immediacy in the confrontation with the source." Taylor, pp. 12, 13; see also Robert Douch, "Local History," in Martin Ballard, New Movements in the Study and Teaching of History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 109; Halstead, pp. 25, 27; Charles F. Ritter, "The Dynamics of History: A New Approach to the Survey," The History Teacher, Vol. VI (February, 1973), esp. pp. 245-47; Althea L. Stoeckel, American History for Honors Freshmen: Report on an Experimental Laboratory Course at Ball State University (Muncie: Ball State University, 1969), pp. 1-5.

[15]Daniels, p. 67. It should be noted that it is also possible to acquaint students with the elements of historical thinking through critical analysis of secondary sources.

[16]David N. Keightly, "Improving Writing Skills in A History Lecture Course," The History Teacher, XII, No. 2 (February, 1979), p. 175: see also Raymond G. Hebert, "'The Craft of History': Teaching History as a Skill," Teaching History: A Journal of Methods, VI, No. 2 (Fall, 1981), p. 70.

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